

Nagercoil
Claire Ashmead

The restaurant is dim, the company good. Women in beautiful iridescent saris, sheaths of rainbow stitch and pattern, shift and shimmer in the downy light. Their backs breathe in crevices and wrinkles to the open air, and their feet shuffle on the floor like matted pawns on a chessboard.

We sit in the open-air top floor, where the walls are brown and hung with fresh banners, and the air dances outside in dark-blue smears and squares. We huddle even as the heat sifts and shifts around us like sand, piling at our feet and digging in crystal cubes into our skin. It clings and bites to us softly. We let it settle over us until we can swim.

The food is hot and spicy. Yellow rice, a thick goop green curry like dense duckweed, red spice fried cauliflower French fries, garlic naan as thick and greasy as buttered bread. Hands reach and pull, and tentative fingers sniff out tastes and textures. They tear and pluck and scoop at the meal.

Talk and laugh and eat and laugh and eat. So many stories, gobbled faster than the food, stuffed until the mind groans with excess. The food is hardly gone and still the mouths move on, pink flashes on white, always curved up, up, up. We laugh until our belly aches and the food threatens to find its way back to the plate. But no, just one more – some naan to dilute the spice, slathered in paneer and curry, making our eyes blissfully water until the whole restaurant is a beautiful orange-blue blur.

There are stars somewhere, to remind us it is night. They blink with us, winking in the corner of our eyes as we squeeze shut with the taste, tensing and pursing our bodies to let the pepper shiver through us. The women in the saris lean forward, and their clothes seem to catch and reflect so much darkness, to trap the light and hold it hostage. They shroud themselves modestly in the black dark that compiles in the corners and crevices of the restaurant, throwing a shawl of discreet shadow over their shoulders, bending away from our light-bulb eyes. They walk here in a perpetual night-day.

When we leave – as we must, though I cannot remember the descent from that vertical palace to the sweltering mud streets below – we push into the dark womb of the city at night. The air is brown and the roads are dark, earth crumbling around our feet like coffee grinds. Vendors and their open-hole shops form deep pockets in the night, like creases in saris, but gaunt and mute as wood and clay. The city shine is painted over with a sleepy night.

The wind is balmy, and the sand heat rubs at our cheeks and wrists, silk-scrubs our ankles and open toes. My skin cracks and spiderwebs dry in the air, baking to a soft beige in the dimness. Before the hotel we climb into rickshaws, with knees bent at angles and heads pressed into tilts, holding our breath as they clunk and rumble rum rum to a choppy start. In them we are tiny bugs, clicking green-yellow insects scattered onto the road. I am riding beneath this one's shell. If I wanted, I could pick away at its hard-candy hub, its gizzard and innards, fraying and fragmenting the brown rust and green paint until it bleeds oil. But the beetle self-decays before my eyes, paint and rust chipping and falling behind us like the shedding of a skin as we snake quizzically in and out of light pools cast by the tall glooms of streetlamps.

I smile and rumble thrum with the engine; I skate on the edges of the silver-pitch wheel rattle that whirrs beneath. I can look out at the slow moving world around, in the dark brown depths of the city night, and I can almost hear that same sound I heard when we were in the jungles of the south, that belly music like an aching prayer –

But we arrive at the hotel and it is no longer there. Almond paste diamonds for dessert, wrapped in wax paper and chewy even to the touch. We eat mindlessly and dress for bed. Is it ever bedtime here? I do not remember how, but I must have fallen asleep. I wake up to a different city than the one I saw before.

On the Plane to India

It is on the plane that I first realize where I am going. The swathed bodies and the smiles, people so different pressed into white shirts and starched jeans, smiling brown cowboys tipping their heads to us as we pass – there is something different here. The language they speak is beautiful and runny as an egg yolk, liquid and golden. I want to eat up the words, to smear them on my ears and sit and listen. At first I think they are speaking English, and then their voices dissolve into an incoherent Hindi babble on my ears, liquid and bubbly, running merrily along in slips and slides down their tongues. They are laughing now at a joke in front of us, unashamedly, joyful. It is delicious to listen to, all foreign and all familiar.

We go to sit down, and even the seats of AirIndia somehow seep the smells of coriander and cardamom and busy city streets. The colors are warmer, richer, and more faded here. They aren't the manufactured neons, the black matte, the pressed prim bland paraded on American mannequins. There is something wearied and tired in the faded yellow that retches gold mixed with orange, in the stained red carpet whose dye has been lightened and worn to dappled spots. They are nauseating, beautiful colors, stale and ancient, dusty and thick as grime, but lovely in their texture and their depth. They stretch to the backs of the eyes and sink into the skull, so the whole world is red and orange-yellow, sari silk and twisted fabric hook.

They whisper and laugh around me. They are excited for home – you can read it in the cheeks and the creases in their eyes, you can hear it from in their throats, the joy that rises and shines. They speak together as friends though they must be strangers; they share and eat of the same culture, so they call themselves family. Their mouths move as same mouths, pink and grey, and their skin wrinkles as one skin, one tent, a segmented covering for all. There is unity here, a burgeoning bubble, one that cups and holds them in its embrace. We watch from the outside, wondering how they can have such friendship – such brown-eyed intimacy – with strangers.

But they are not the strangers, we are the strangers, and growing stranger still. The world moves in sliding brown scales as we move down the runway, the plane rattling and jolting like some perplexed metal bird, a deep thrum beneath syncing with the overhead drone-whine of the air ducts. They lean forward in anticipation, or close their eyelids in relief, or smile, a small one, to themselves.

15 hours later, there is a rattle and a crash and we hit the tarmac with our wings still caught on American wind. We are in India. But it has not hit me yet – I don't know when it will. Maybe I will pass forever from plane to airport to plane, a grey mist hanging at the thumbs, condensed in the cool air-conditioned a-cultural womb of the high-vaulted empty docks and airport food courts. The world is still and brown outside through the wide airport windows, and so palely golden, like fertile soil turned up to the brightest light. I cannot be sure I am not somewhere else entirely, or that I am leaving this dusky reservoir for good. This is what it means to travel.